

# U.S. Election Assistance Commission

## Quick Start Management Guide on Accessibility

The Quick Start Management Guide on Accessibility is part of a series of brochures designed to highlight and summarize the information contained in the chapters of the U.S. Election Assistance Commission's (EAC) *Election Management Guidelines (EMG)*. The goal of the EMG is to provide a collection of administrative practices, consolidated into one document, to assist State and local election officials to effectively manage and administer elections. These guidelines are designed solely to serve as a source of information for election officials. However, due to the need for election management resources, Quick Starts are released as they are completed.

The content of the EMG and the Quick Start Management Guides has been developed in collaboration with Federal agencies and disability organizations, as well as State and local election officials and other election professionals who have first-hand experience managing elections. The EAC is grateful for their participation to ensure that the guidelines are practical and applicable for jurisdictions regardless of their size and resources. The EMG and the Quick Starts are available online at [www.eac.gov](http://www.eac.gov).

### Introduction

- Election officials work each day to make elections more accessible to the public. Voting systems with improved accessibility have facilitated independent voting for some voters with disabilities for the first time in their lives. The added focus on making polling places accessible also serves to help people with disabilities to vote independently on Election Day.
- 1 in 5 people in the U.S. has a disability. "Disability" is defined by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) as a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, a record of such an impairment, or being regarded as having such an impairment<sup>1</sup>.
  - Over half of all people who have a physical disability are hard of hearing.
- Some disabilities are easily perceptible (e.g. persons in wheelchairs or who use assistance animals). However, many people with disabilities do not exhibit easily observable manifestations such as canes, guide dogs, or the use of sign language. Therefore, individuals who interact with the public should be perceptive and try to anticipate the needs of people who may require assistance.
- People can experience disabilities relating to hearing, speech, vision, dexterity, mobility, or cognition. Other populations include those with environmental sensitivities to substances, such as perfumes and air fresheners. Disabilities can range from mild to severe.
- "Accessibility" is a term that refers to the removal of barriers that make it difficult or impossible for some people with disabilities to use something. It can refer to the physical environment (e.g., the polling place) or to technology (e.g., the voting systems.) Working to improve accessibility for persons with disabilities supports increased involvement in the electoral process.

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<sup>1</sup> 42 U.S.C. § 12102

- There are many laws that are designed to assist people with disabilities. Federal laws including the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) cover accessibility issues such as the physical polling place, the voting activity, and the voting systems. State laws may also be helpful. For example, some State laws governing information technology help to ensure that elections offices websites are accessible to persons with disabilities.
- Accessibility covers all aspects of running an elections office – registering to vote, accessing a website, recruiting and training poll workers, entering a polling place, and casting a secret ballot. Accessibility needs are far-reaching, and have been addressed by the EAC in several other Quick Start Guides. They are “Polling Places and Vote Centers;” “Ballot Preparation/Printing and Pre-Election Testing;” “Poll Workers;” “Absentee Voting and Vote by Mail;” “Media and Public Relations;” and, “Serving Voters in Long Term Care Facilities.”
- The Quick Start on Accessibility provides many examples of ways to improve accessibility and to incorporate these practices into all aspects of election administration.

## **Managing an Accessible Elections Office**

- Staff and Poll Worker Training
  - Review all training material for full and part-time staff and poll workers. Ensure that it includes accessibility training.
  - *Example training videos include:*
    - Oregon’s *Assisting Voters with Disabilities Training Video* ([http://www.sos.state.or.us/elections/HAVA/avwd\\_captions.wmv](http://www.sos.state.or.us/elections/HAVA/avwd_captions.wmv))
    - North Carolina’s *State Board of Elections Accessibility Videos* (<http://www.sboe.state.nc.us/content.aspx?id=57>)
  - Voters may not be aware of available accommodations for persons with disabilities. Because of this, poll workers and elections office staff should be trained to notice disabilities and to offer to help.
    - For example, a voter may report difficulty seeing where to sign-in at the check-in table. A poll worker trained to identify voters who are visually impaired might offer a magnifying glass for the signature sheet. Such an offer could also serve as an opportunity to provide information about voting systems with screen magnification options.
    - *Tip: It is best to face people when talking to them as opposed to speaking while looking down at the poll book.*
  - Understanding a few tips in disability etiquette may help an election official to interact more effectively. Basics include: not making assumptions, asking before helping, and being sensitive about physical contact. It is better, for example, to offer an arm when leading someone who is blind to a voting station, rather than grabbing their arm and pulling them. Service animals, such as guide dogs, are allowed in the polling place and it is not appropriate to pet them while they are working.

Disability etiquette publications with further information can be viewed freely on the Internet and make informative inserts in a poll worker training package.

- Accountability
  - Discuss appointing a staff member in the elections office with responsibility for improving accessibility during election administration.
  - Encourage advance development of a procedure for handling accessibility complaints or inquiries.
  - Prepare information and instructions for voters with disabilities about the processes to register to vote and for using the accessibility features of voting systems.
- Disability Outreach
  - Review all printed material available to the public and offer it in alternative formats. For example, some jurisdictions provide large print example ballots at the polls. If a document can be made available electronically on a website, then it can be reviewed by voters before they go to the polling place. Consider providing materials in large print and audio versions.
  - Create a partnership between State and local jurisdictions and disability nonprofit groups to pool resources to develop accessibility solutions. From poll worker accessibility training to checklists for inspecting polling places, there are many resources already available. Most of these can be tailored to fit the needs of just about any jurisdiction.
    - *Tip: Consider establishing an Accessibility Advisory Board within the jurisdiction. Schedule regular meetings to solicit input and to gather suggestions and ideas about how to make the voting process and polling places more accessible to individuals with disabilities.*
  - Outreach to Voters
    - Election officials might consider developing an outreach plan to raise awareness among voters with disabilities about accessible polling places and the accessible elections program in the jurisdiction.
    - The outreach might include the following:
      - Do voters with disabilities know how to...
        - Register to vote;
        - Use the accessible voting system?
      - Do voters with disabilities know about various available accommodations such as...
        - Information in large print on paper;
        - The documents and other information viewable in advance on an elections website;

- Do voters with disabilities know whom to contact if they have a problem?
- Outreach to Government
  - Most States have a Governor's Commission on Disability that advises the State on disabilities issues.
  - Many counties also have local commissions that focus on improving access to government for individuals with disabilities. These organizations may help local election officials reach those individuals in the community who might need information on the various accessibility accommodations.
- Outreach to Nonprofits
  - Reach out to the disability community for assistance in circulating voter registration information and voting materials and for poll worker recruitment. Organizations in the community can assist election officials in providing information to their constituents.
  - Disability organizations may be able to help locate individuals with disabilities or accessibility expertise to help evaluate voting systems as part of State or local procurement process.
    - *Tip: When purchasing new voting equipment, reach out to the disabilities community to participate in the selection of the equipment. Continue to use them as a resource for ballot design and testing of the audio ballot.*
  - Experienced staff of disability organizations may be able to review draft documents from an accessibility perspective. Such materials might include marketing materials, emergency evacuation procedures, voting instructions (including for audio ballots) and/or public service announcements.
  - Disability organizations may welcome an invitation to help present a component of poll worker training on sensitivity to disability issues.
- Information and Communications Technology
  - Technology related to election administration includes telephones, websites, voting systems, and electronic documents (such as an online voter registration application).
  - Internet accessibility evaluation tools are software programs or online services that help determine if a website meets commonly accepted accessibility standards and guidelines. While Internet accessibility evaluation tools can significantly reduce the time and effort to evaluate websites, no tool can automatically determine the accessibility of a website. Some of these tools can be used in combination to address specific aspects of the evaluation process. Many, but not all, of those software companies charge a fee for their tool.
    - A list of Web Accessibility Evaluation Tools can be found at the website of the W3C Web Accessibility Initiative:

<http://www.w3.org/WAI/RC/tools/>

- When posting information to a website, it may be easiest to provide accessible materials in a word processor-formatted document or in HTML. These formats are more easily read by a text-to-audio screen reader for use by an individual with impaired vision.
  - *Tip: Consider using alt-tags for pictures, graphics, tables and graphs.*
  - *Tip: To make websites more accessible, website designers may use the Electronic and Information Technology Accessibility Standards issued by the U.S. Access Board and Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) developed by the W3C Web Accessibility Initiative. Web designers sometimes use web accessibility tools to make their jobs easier.*

## **Providing an Accessible Voting Experience**

- Accessibility of the Physical Environment (Polling Place)
  - Election officials should review the ADA Checklist for Polling Places (<http://www.ada.gov/votingprt.pdf>) prepared by the U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, Disability Rights Section.
  - Election officials should consider the impact all of the following can have on accessibility (See Quick Start Guide and EMG chapter on “Polling Place and Vote Center Management”):
    - Parking
    - Passenger Drop-Off Areas
    - Sidewalks and Walkways
    - Building Entrances
    - Hallways and Corridors
    - Voting Area
    - Ramps
    - Curbside Voting
  - Election officials should consider the accessibility of alternate entrances that voters may use to reach the polling place.
- Programmatic Accommodations
  - Look for inexpensive, tangible solutions, such as providing a chair for individuals who have difficulty standing in a line at the polling place or posting voting instructions in large print.
  - Intangible accommodations might mean providing assistance to a voter as he or she completes the ballot, if requested.
  - Acoustics

- Loud environments can increase the stress level for everyone, but it is especially challenging for people who are hard of hearing. In addition, people who must depend on hearing an audible ballot may need the accessible voting system placed in a quiet area.
    - One polling place creatively addressed this by placing the voting system on an accessible stage that was isolated by curtains.
    - The use of inexpensive portable assistive listening devices (approximately \$120-\$180) may help voters and poll workers with hearing loss to understand speech in noisy situations.
  - *Tip: Simple solutions can reduce echo and audio reflection, such as cloth table covers, framing and draperies, rugs on the floor, etc.*
- Accessibility of Voting Systems
  - Most voting systems have some accessibility.
  - Poll workers should describe accessible voting systems in a manner that encourages people to use them.
  - Persons with disabilities use a variety of assistive technologies to address vision, hearing, mobility, dexterity, memory, reading and other functional limitations. These individuals are **allowed** to bring necessary assistive technology (e.g., hearing aids, neckloops, mobility aids, switches, and magnifiers) into the polling location and are encouraged to use assistive technology to supplement the accessibility tools available as part of a voting system.
- Long-Term Care Facilities and Mobile Polling
  - Develop an outreach program targeted to nursing homes and long-term care facilities. (See Quick Start Guide on “Serving Voters in Long Term Care Facilities”)
  - Mobile polling involves election officials bringing ballots to convenient and accessible locations, such as long term care facilities, and skilled, non-partisan election workers providing assistance to voters upon request and—where permitted—to register voters.
- Poll Workers
  - Recruitment
    - Recruit individuals with disabilities to fill the job of poll worker. Remember that the presence of a poll worker with disabilities may make voters with disabilities more comfortable in the polling place and more receptive to offers of assistance.
      - *Example: In jurisdictions with a large deaf population, recruit poll workers who are trained in sign language.*
    - Reach out to community groups that represent the disability community.

- Assign at least one poll worker in each polling place with responsibility for assuring that all available accessibility aids are present in the polling place and responding to voters and poll workers with disabilities.
- Ideas for improving conditions for poll workers with disabilities
  - Split Shifts – Some poll workers with disabilities would benefit from having this option.
  - Do not forget about the environmental sensitivities of the voters and poll workers.
  - Provide grip tools and magnifying strips.
- See the EAC's *Successful Practices for Poll Worker Recruitment, Training, and Retention* available at <http://www.eac.gov>
- *Tip: Ask poll workers to complete a questionnaire following every election to determine additional needs and to also provide ideas and solutions for addressing accessibility needs on Election Day.*

## **Accessibility Resources**

- American Association of People with Disabilities  
<http://www.aapd.com>
- American Bar Association Commission on Law and Aging Voting and Cognitive Impairments  
<http://new.abanet.org/aging/Pages/voting.aspx>
- Disability and Business Technical Assistance Centers (DBTACs)  
<http://www.votingaccess.org/>
- The Election Center  
<http://www.electioncenter.org>
- National Federation for the Blind (Nonvisual Election Technology)  
[http://www.nfb.org/nfb/HAVA\\_intro.asp](http://www.nfb.org/nfb/HAVA_intro.asp)
- National Institute of Standards and Technology  
<http://vote.nist.gov>
- United States Access Board  
<http://www.access-board.gov>
- Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI)  
<http://www.w3.org/WAI/>

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*The EAC is an independent bipartisan commission created by the Help America Vote Act of 2002 (HAVA). It is charged with administering payments to states and developing guidance to meet HAVA requirements, implementing election administration improvements, adopting voluntary voting system guidelines, accrediting voting system test laboratories and certifying voting equipment and serving as a national clearinghouse and resource of information regarding election administration.*